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## **WE DO NOT WANT INDIAN IMPERIALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN**

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### **C O N T E N T S**

1. INDIAN IMPERIALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN  
(This is an extended version of  
an article submitted to the  
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2. THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY  
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## INDIAN IMPERIALISM IN THE CARIBBEAN

In our modern world no state can adopt isolationism as a long-term policy. For ease of communication and movement and economic and ecological realities are so all-pervading that events in any one country invariably have international repercussions. Since segregation cannot be a meaningful contemporary state policy the question of the relationship between states assumes major significance. This is further emphasized by the fact that states vary very much in size, and in economic and geopolitical power. Our focal concern therefore is the quality of the relationship between states. Is it one of dominance or of mutual respect, of dependence or interdependence?

Technological, industrial and political developments during the 19th century led increasingly to state policies which aimed at dominating and establishing control over other states irrespective of whether they were contiguous or distant. And in the 20th century military and economic factors have loomed so large in international relations that traditional concepts of nationalism have had to be revised. Now as we approach the 21st century, imperialism, that all-pervasive and far-reaching sinister weapon which Europeans perfected in their drive for world domination has new adherents, as former victims of colonialism aim to establish themselves as world powers.

If it dies at all, Imperialism dies hard. The main thrust of this article therefore is an examination of the growth of Indian Imperialism. At one level it affects the very concept of ourselves as a Caribbean people. But at another and far more dangerous level, traditional imperialistic attitudes of the United States towards this region, and occasional Venezuelan incursions into Caribbean politics, could make these small island states be once more pawns in an international power game as we were in the 17th and 18th centuries. Caribbean society was built at too high a price of human



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exploitation for us to sit meekly and allow the sacrifices of our forefathers to go undefended.

Let us therefore now focus our attention on India's progress as a world power since independence in 1947. In 1961 the Government just simply marched into Goa, the former Portuguese state on the west coast and took it over by force. For India there was none of the Chinese tolerance shown with respect to Hong Kong and Macao. Though European political wisdom talks about Indian democracy and Chinese dictatorship, the latter has shown less willingness to use force to put an end to the era of European aggression than the former. With respect to its northern neighbours, China and Pakistan, without concerning ourselves with who was the aggressor, India used force in its territorial disputes with both countries, and played a leading role in the creation of the state of Bangladesh, which brought a significant reduction in the size of Pakistan. In more recent times Indian military and diplomatic power has played a leading role in Sri Lanka's Tamil problems with that country's approval.

These imperialistic excursions of the Indian Republic, supported by diplomatic thrusts overseas, gave the Indian diaspora after independence, new visions of status which often found expression through arrogance. This proved to be expensive in East Africa where Asian insensitivity incensed Africans in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania and led in some cases to persecution and dispossession of property. In Tanzania, for example, which as a British Trust territory between the two world wars had received only limited British investment, the Asian population blatantly paraded its wealth before the eyes of poor Africans every Sunday afternoon along the waterfront in Dar es Salaam. They seemed oblivious to the fact that their behaviour was bound to offend the pride of Africans who themselves had just been freed from many decades of colonial subjugation.

Here in the Caribbean an aggressive diplomatic thrust led to requests by the British Government for a change in ambassadorial representation in the late 1940's. But this did not

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put an end to India's imperialistic ambitions within the area, nor did it make Indo-Caribbeans see themselves as Indians living in a Western cultural milieu and not as human extensions of a Mother India.

Within recent times the Indian High Commissioner's Office has taken on a high profile, and the Indian Government has according to reports offered to build an Indian cultural centre in the country. Apparently such an offer was made during Dr Williams's regime, but being himself imperialistic in attitude, (We can all recall his 1962 plan to set up a Caribbean unitary state with Trinidad as the centre), and conscious of imperialism's pervading evils he said: "No thank you". In the same way he got rid of the British Council which he saw as an unwanted expression of cultural imperialism. Even with respect to the U.S.A. and other foreign powers with interest in the area he attempted in 1975, through the Caribbean Co-ordinating Development Committee (C.D.C.C.), to put a cordon sanitaire around the Caribbean.

Dr Williams's efforts led to limited success, but it must not be assumed that the removal of the PNM from office paves the way for rejection by the society of all that Dr Williams stood for, even though since his death his successors have proved themselves incapable of vocalizing his strengths. Indian cultural imperialism must not be permitted in this society, and if the present Government errs in this direction, there will be pressure on a successor Government, which will definitely come at some time, to break diplomatic relations with India and call for removal of the High Commissioner's Office.

Now the logic on which this forceful statement is based has to be clearly understood. In the first place we are all conscious of caste and religious differences in India which have plagued that society from time immemorial and we don't wish to import any of them here. Since independence there have been constant clashes between Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Moslems etc. which have resulted in hundreds of thousands of



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deaths. The Mahatma, himself a Hindu, was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic in 1948. Mrs Gandhi was gunned down by a Sikh. As I write today a prominent moderate Sikh has been shot dead in England by a fundamentalist Sikh, and Mr Gandhi has been a target of so much religious and political antagonism that he is heavily guarded whenever he appears in public. All these hostilities in Indian society are likely to develop here when there is a focal point for Indians to start arguing about which of them portrays the rightful expression of India's greatness. It will be a move back to the domestic Indian hostilities of a few decades ago.

Furthermore the presence of a physical structure symbolizing Indian power can easily become a target for anti-Indian feeling in the country as non-Indians try to work off frustrations arising from failures of the society to satisfy their hopes and ambitions. One cannot fail to notice that both the American and the Indian embassies have erected storm fences around their buildings. This kind of action leads one to suspect that there is consciousness of the probability of mob assaults on their premises by citizens of their host Government. An Indian Government's cultural centre can therefore add a new dimension to conflict in the society which we can well do without.

Secondly, the Indian population in this region has to understand quite clearly the forces which brought them here and those which can sustain them. Surely they can learn lessons from both Fiji and Guyana. The Caribbean is placed most solidly geographically within the West. Its societies are not only all Western, but also new. This means among other things that there are no traditional religious, class, caste and tribal structures of Eastern cultures determining social relationships. No Indian Brahmin brought status with him as an indentured servant. (Read V.S. Naipaul). And whether the indentee spoke Hindi, Urdu or whatever when he came, he had to adopt a creolized English in order to communicate. He became a westerner in a New World. He became a new kind of man cut adrift from a traditional society.

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The language through which he communicated was not the Englishman's English, but a language which had already been crafted out of the need for Africans and Europeans to communicate with each other. And why did they have to communicate? Not out of brotherly love and affection, but because Europeans were using the labour of African slaves to create the society which Indians met when they came here. And why were the Indians brought? Not because of the languages they spoke or of their caste or religions, but to supplement African labour which was in short supply on sugar plantations. Indians left not only their social structure behind when they came here, but also their dependence on regional languages and dialects for communication. And even those who did not come had to come to terms with the English language in their own country in order to be part of their nation's political economy. So that today English is the lingua franca of the Indian peninsula. The English were not halfway imperialist, they imperialized totally.

Indians and Africans therefore have a common interest in the Caribbean and they will have to work out their destinies here, but neither one should aim to reach back to the source of its ancestry to attract imperial domination which could significantly alter the cultural balance established by both ethnic groups over time. To do so is to court internal conflict. By all means individual enthusiasts must continue going to India and Africa to draw from the cultural wealth of those ancient societies so that our own outpourings can be enriched. And all foreign cultural troupes are welcome to display their own richness of human expression within our area. But we, as a people, Indians and Africans are the ones to determine what will be added to our regional cultural amalgam, not any foreign power.

The temptation for Indians in the region to capitalize on India's imperialistic ambitions is understood. Unlike Africa, the Indian peninsula was occupied and colonized by Britain. So that the end of colonial rule saw the establishment of a unified geopolitical entity with the resources to harbour and develop imperialistic ambitions. In the case of



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Africa the land mass was occupied, but never completely colonized and governed. Hence the need for a major occupying power like Britain to take in its own satrapies from India, especially in the East of the continent. Maybe Africans were fortunate to be viewed by Europeans as primitive savages who could not be governed directly by themselves, so that the end of colonial rule has left the continent with dozens of states none of which is, or is ever likely to be, rich enough to be able to extend its imperialistic ambitions much beyond its own borders.

But non-Indians will not allow the development of an ancient Eastern culture in Caribbean society because they do not want to be taken back to a world of religious and cultural conflict which by and large the West left behind in varying degrees a couple of centuries ago, but which still exists in the Middle East and India. And it is difficult to believe that all Indian communities in the Caribbean would welcome such a development. Indians have been here for well over a hundred years and they have both fitted into and made valuable contributions to the society they met here when they came. And I don't think that there are people here who are hostile to their cultural and other human inputs. But the Indian Government will not be allowed to impose cultural imperialism on our society, nor any other Government for that matter. Indians have, as West Indians helped to enrich life in the region and this it is hoped they will continue to do so as products of their specific human traditions. We are all a westernized people and we are going to remain so. In Dr Williams's aggressive and uncompromising language, though not used in this context, those who don't like it "could get to hell out of here".

The third important point has to do with language, education and class. Within recent times there has been a call for the teaching of Hindu in schools. Mr Winston Dookeran, whom I had thought, as a social scientist, had acquired universal tools for looking at social problems, has been one of those promoting this idea. Mr Dookeran has his history all wrong. No Indian indentee was brought here because he spoke Hindi

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or any other language any more than African slaves were brought here because they spoke Fante or Yoruba or anything else. Nor were indentees and slaves brought here because of their religion. The *raison d'être* for their presence was the provision of labour. So the question does not arise of any politician today denying anyone a language or religion. All human beings are instances of cultural expressions and these are with them when they travel. But no politician, or no one else for that matter, has a moral responsibility to preserve and foster in any individual the cultural characteristics which he brings to a society. It is the individual's duty to himself to go through a process of adjustment or return whence he came. I dealt with this problem early in 1973 by publicly condemning an African obsession with Swahili, though I don't know that it reached the absurd proportion of a call for its teaching in schools. Furthermore, in so far as Indians were concerned, they were able to get their return passages paid if they were so obsessed with India that they wanted to leave here. We can assume that those who are here are descendants of those who did not want to return. If however there are Indians in our midst who are hankering for the Motherland then they should call on the Indian Government to get them back "home". We don't want schizophrenic nationals in our midst.

Whether he is conscious of it or no, Mr Dookeran is reverting to the tactics of the post war Road Engineer, Mr Ranjit Kumar, who got Indian votes by addressing crowds in the central belt in Hindi. Exactly why do people who are educated want to keep the lower classes in their poverty by denying them the very instruments which are indispensable for improving their economic status? Mr Dookeran is a well spoken English speaker with a good command of the language, which was the medium through which he made himself into an economist. Now he wants Indian children in schools to spend their time learning to speak Hindi. What will they do with it? Go to India to learn economics? They will be taught in English, not Hindi. Does he really want to retard the progress of Indian children by having them spend time during school hours learning Hindi instead of acquiring the know-



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ledge required to manage technologies of the modern world? Is Mr Dookeran's position reflecting lack of concern for the Indian poor and dispossessed in the society? Is this a reflection of Indian caste and/or class values? Or is it a reflexion of middle-class and professional values in our society? I should like to believe that Mr Dookeran, like myself, would not like to see either class or interracial strife in our society, so he should avoid the temptation to say things which could inflame passions. That said, however, I want to congratulate him on bringing to the fore the whole question of racial particularism. It has been swept under the carpet particularly by minority groups in whose private interests it is good to talk about peace and harmony while they move their money abroad so that they can go to it if the crunch comes.

Finally I want to give Africans and Indians in this society a new perspective. Many millions in the countries from which our ancestors came are experiencing aggrandisement and deprivation than what any of their counterparts are subject to in the Caribbean. Quite apart from the situation in Southern Africa where a minority government of Euro-Africans is ruthlessly denying indigenous Africans and Indo-Africans basic human rights, and attempting through military exploits to destabilize all its neighbours, there are millions of Africans and Indians across both continents who do not know where the next meal is coming from. Many who do not know what it is to sit at a table on a morning, or to enter a house or to lie on a bed when the night comes.

Are these not part of our concern as Africans and Indians? Can those of us who have become professionally and socially successful in our society say that we are interested in the greatness of Africa and India when we know that in many conurbations, of which Calcutta is most likely the worst example, there are millions who spend their lives living amidst their own excrement? Should we not be calling on governments in those countries to do something about the conditions under which their citizens are living rather than selfishly seeking aggrandisement in our own relatively more

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humanized environment? Let Indian professionals and businessmen in this society prove that far from being selfish and self-indulgent they care about their brothers and sisters in India, by telling the Indian Government that it must use the funds which they want to spend on a cultural centre in the Caribbean to provide housing facilities for the millions of families living on pavements and gutters in Calcutta. This would be a far greater contribution to human happiness. It should also fill Indo-Caribbeans with a sense of pride to know that they have contributed to human welfare in the continent from which their ancestors came.

In my pamphlet on the politics of the PNM I stated that Dr Williams played with the beast of racial conflict in 1961, but he soon realized that he was playing with fire which would have engulfed him and he mended his ways. His free-wheeling liberal economics did the rest to maintain peace and create a flow of wealth into the hands of a few Indians. But the task of finding those common factors which apply to the broad mass of the unemployed and disadvantaged families across the whole spectrum of society irrespective of race and ethnicity have to-date proved illusive. And if the NAR, like the PNM cannot find them, it would be better to relinquish power because the people have been waiting a long time and their patience is running out. In the meantime, however, the last thing the society wants is further complication of its problems by having any foreign power, be it African or Indian, inject any of its imperialistic ambitions into the society through the erection of a cultural centre.



## THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

When people feel that they are lost and turn backwards in a search for roots upon which they could build a new identity, there is always the likelihood that logic will play no part in the search, simply because of the overwhelming need to satisfy the emotional urge to re-create themselves. Within the Caribbean the African revivalist movement commonly referred to as "black identity" stems from the continuation of the neo-colonial system which accords the mass of the population an inferior status no different from that experienced during the colonial era.

It is possible that for the masses to create a society in which they can give vent to their political ambitions and be the beneficiaries of the new socio-economic order, they first have to build up in themselves a sense of belonging. And possibly for the mass of African descendants a return to some concept of primordial beauty will help. Personally I think this is an unfortunate though understandable development, for it plays into the hands of those forces in the world that thrive on division.

Here in Trinidad the descendants of African slaves and indentured Indians can only, in the mass, improve their socio-political and economic status by looking for the common factors within the existing structure which keep them oppressed. These factors are certainly not cultural. Carnival, calypsoes, steel band music, Phagwa, Eid, Diwali, African dress and dance, Indian cultural performances, Chinese Lion dance etc., are not in themselves hindrances to unity. But they are all tools which in the hands of skilful operators can be used as divisive forces.

The renewed interest which the secular establishment has shown in these aspects of our cultural heritage over the last decade or so, while at the same time perpetuating an economic system which must lead to rising inflation, high unemployment and increase in income disparities, and a

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political system which stifles the desire of the populace for meaningful management in the affairs of the society, should make us realize that there is much more in the mortar than the pebble.

In the midst of all the cultural confusion those who have been hoodwinked most are the ones yearning for an African identity. They are carrying on the tradition of being very efficient copycats, and their point of reference is as usual the North American continent. The Afro hairdo is now one of the in-things. That this has little reference to Africa is in some ways good. The important point is that it contributes to the re-creation of a personal image, and is a break away from the Anglo-Saxon tradition. This is what really matters. But it is not quite clear to me what is the logic behind the movement to popularize Swahili in the Caribbean. Does this arise from ignorance or is it a further adoption of the Roman method: "Let us throw some Christians to the lions to keep the populace quiet"?

It is hard to believe that the clerics who are officiating at so-called African masses conducted in Swahili are ignorant of the historical background of the Africans who were brought to the New World. But let us be charitable and give them the benefit of our doubts. The fact is that the slaves who were brought to the Americas came mainly from the Atlantic coast of Africa, primarily from the regions bordering the Gulf of Guinea - Ghana, Nigeria, Camerons etc. They were not Swahili speaking people, and even today Swahili is a foreign language in that part of the continent. Swahili is a language of the East African coast. It is basically Bantu, but it borrowed heavily from Arabic, and there are also traces of such languages as Persian, Hindi, Portuguese and English in it. The term Swahili itself is derived from the Arabic word: Sawahili which means 'coastal'. The language developed and became the lingua franca of the coast mainly because of the activities of Arab traders. Europeans, particularly the Germans, played a large part in extending the territory over which the language is spoken because it was used by them as a language of administration. In what is now



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known as Tanzania the language got its firmest roots because of the extensive colonization of the Germans. But even today it is not spoken by all the peoples in any African state. It is an official language in Tanzania and in due course of time it will no doubt be spoken by all the peoples in that country. In Uganda, a term derived from the Swahili name for Buganda, Swahili competes for the role of national language with English and the language of the Bagandans, the largest Bantu speaking people in the country. In fact the Bagandans who are a people with an aristocratic tradition regard their language as being superior to Swahili which was exposed to much foreign influence. In Kenya while Swahili is firmly established on the coast, it is not spoken by all the Kikuyu, who though Bantu speaking belong to the central highlands of the country. And to the Luo, a Nilotic people of Western Kenya, second only to the Kikuyu in numbers, it is a foreign language.

The important point for our purpose is that the mass of African slaves who came to the Americas did not come from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Mozambique, which are the main Swahili speaking countries in Africa today. When the slave trade ended in the early 19th century Swahili was only beginning to spread inwards from the East African coast and it never reached the West though it did penetrate into the upper reaches of the Congo. If people in Trinidad want to learn Swahili, nothing is wrong with that. But it will be tragic to believe that this would help them to find an African identity. Such they can never find. History has already determined that. They will still be West Indians or Afro-Caribbeans or whatever they choose to call themselves. What people here are really in search of are the foundations on which they can build a sense of pride, belonging and achievement in our society. They want to feel that they belong to that section of humanity which is accorded the right to be treated with respect by all and sundry, irrespective of race, colour or creed. But the foundations that they are looking for are here in the Caribbean. As the calypsonian Chalk Dust says: "It is right here you will find your identity".



This brochure is a publication of the PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY, an organization which any who is interested in building a DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY in the Caribbean is free to join. There is no entrance fee and no racial, ethnic or religious barriers. ALL ARE FREE TO JOIN.

The main purpose of this SOCIETY is to foster discussion on the socio-economic and political problems of our society and to consider ways in which they can be dealt with.

For enrolment please write to the co-ordinator:

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Mr Ifill is a trained certificated teacher who studied philosophy, politics and economics at the London School of Economics, London University, and the University of Oxford. He was a Senior Economic Adviser in the United Nations, and was United Nations Regional Economic Officer for the Caribbean from 1976 to 1980. He was the Workers and Farmers Party (W.F.P.) candidate for South East Port of Spain in 1966. He has been a regular contributor to the Press for more than 25 years. In 1986 he published "The Politics of Dr Eric Williams and the P.N.M." (\$5.60) and "The African Diaspora" (\$36.00).